Twin Traditions

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Twin traditions: The biopic and the composed film in British art cinema

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In his personal meditation on British cinema, *Fire Over England* (1993), Ken Russell quipped that indigenous critics and audiences might have been more accepting of his work had he been named "Russellini".[i] What might at first seem like a throwaway comment is, in fact, a provocation typical of one of British cinema's most controversial figures. Reading between the lines, Russell's statement is a thinly-veiled attack on the inbuilt prejudice in British film culture towards home-grown talent that dares to produce work that is visually flamboyant, technically experimental, and artistically ambitious. As Wendy Everett has pointed out, this kind of filmmaking, for many British critics, is 'aesthetic, inauthentic and self-indulgent' and entirely in opposition to the 'gritty, realistic and authentic work in the tradition of British documentary.'[ii] This attitude has, no doubt, contributed greatly to the perception that Britain has no real art cinema tradition to speak of. At the same time, it has also served to push figures such as Russell to the margins of the British film industry. Indeed, during the final decades of his life, Russell found himself unbankable and almost forgotten, while many historical accounts of British cinema have portrayed him as, at best, an idiosyncratic eccentric or, at worst, an embarrassing aberration.

One thing that both his champions and his detractors can agree on, however, is the fact that Russell is one of British cinema's true *auteurs*, with a highly distinctive and instantly recognisable

style defined by its 'baroque excess'.[iii] But while it is tempting to argue that Russell's visual sense bears closer comparison to the colourful and operatic studies of decadence that Federico Fellini and Luchino Visconti produced in the late 1960s and early 1970s than it does to the work of any British film-maker, this is simply not the case. Russell, for all his idiosyncrasies, is not a *sui generis* figure within British national cinema. On the contrary, his work should be placed within a very clear tradition, which Sarah Street has identified a school of 'deviant, non-realist British cinema'.[iv] Alongside Russell, this tradition includes what Peter Wollen sees as the flowering of neo-romantic and expressionism in late-war and immediate post-war British cinema, including, most notably, the films of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, as well as works by Laurence Olivier, Thorold Dickinson and Alberto Cavalcanti.[v] It continues in the 1960s and 1970s with the work of Russell, John Boorman, Nicolas Roeg and occasional works by Joseph Losey. But perhaps the richest period for this tradition came in the 1980s with the films of Derek Jarman, Peter Greenaway, Terry Gilliam, Sally Potter and Neil Jordan, to name only a few major figures. This school has conspicuously turned away from the themes and aesthetics of social realism in favour of a sensibility that combined aspects of Romanticism, modernism, the *avant-garde* and, at times, the fantastical. A thorough investigation of this director-led, visually-orientated tradition of British cinema - with its suspicion of social realism - would take a book-length study; and, as Julian Petley points out, it would have to take account of more popular genres which engaged with the fantastic, such as Gainsborough melodramas and Hammer horror films, alongside more serious-minded anti-realist films.[vi] Therefore, this chapter will focus instead on some of the overlaps between this anti-realist tradition and British art cinema. It will do this through an examination of two smaller, but artistically significant traditions in British filmmaking, the composed film and the artist's biopic, and will assess how these forms have been exploited by two key figures in British art cinema:

Russell and Peter Greenaway. Firstly, however, this chapter will briefly examine the influence of Powell and Pressburger on the composed film.

Powell and Pressburger and the composed film

'Composed film' was Michael Powell's adopted term for a work that was substantially or entirely shot to a pre-existing music score. While Powell and Pressburger's experiments in this area have been well documented by critics such as Ian Christie and Andrew Moor, they bear repeating in a book dedicated to British art cinema. After all, it was this pair, more than anyone else working in Britain, who sought 'to make film into a significant art form',[vii] by using it to synthesise the other arts, and show as Powell put it, that 'all art is one'. Powell and Pressburger first flirted with the idea of shooting to music while making *Black Narcissus* (1947). As Powell himself notes, 'Owing to my decision not to shoot [the film] in India and try and combine real location photography with studio scenes, I was left free to compose a sound-track, which would be an organic whole of dialogue, sound effects, and music, very much in the way that an opera is composed'.[viii] To this end, Powell enlisted the services of Brian Easdale who, like his contemporary, Benjamin Britten, was a serious composer of opera and ballet who also had some experience scoring short documentaries for the General Post Office and Crown Film Units. Easedale, Powell and Pressburger decided that the film's climactic confrontation between Sister Clodagh (Deborah Kerr) and the lapsed Sister Ruth (Kathleen Byron) should be shot as a composed sequence, without dialogue, which in Powell's own words, 'was planned step by step, bar by bar, by Brian [Easdale] and myself.'[ix] The director also remembers that 'the crew were amazed' when he and Easedale appeared on set 'with stopwatches and exact timings'[x] as well as a piano reduction of the score.

For Powell, this sequence was unquestionably the highlight of the film and he has confessed that, for him, 'this was the only way to make films […] film-making was never the same after this experience, and it was to lead me and my collaborators into tribulations as well as triumph.'[xi]

This experiment was repeated on a far grander scale in their next work, *The Red Shoes*, which Russell called 'the first art film in the history of the British Cinema.'[xii] While not a fully composed film, its centrepiece was a twenty-minute ballet sequence, which was choreographed, shot and edited to an original score by Easdale. One of the most justly celebrated sequences in British film history, the 'Ballet of the Red Shoes' was not presented as a canned stage performance, but rather, in the words of Joseph Gomez, as a 'film-ballet,'[xiii] which could not have been produced in any other medium. At the same time, for Powell, it was also a 'Freudian ballet';[xiv] a dream sequence which uses choreography of the dancers and camera to visualise the inner workings of the protagonist's mind as a kind of stream of consciousness. In this respect, the scene is in keeping with the 'interiorisation of dramatic conflict' that Steve Neale identifies as key trait of art cinema.[xv] But *The Red Shoes* is also an art film by virtue of its relationship to the "high" arts, most notably classical music and ballet. Indeed, the film featured significant contributions from, amongst others, the dancers Léonide Massine, Robert Helpmann, Moira Shearer and Ludmilla Tchérina, and the conductor, Sir Thomas Beecham. Most importantly, however, both the 'Ballet of the Red Shoes', and the film more generally, represent a self-conscious attempt to demonstrate that film is 'in fact, the ultimate art form […] a form of Wagnerian synaesthesia, [and] the ideal medium for bringing all the arts together in a spectacle that included word and image, music and movement.'[xvi]

INSERT FIG 15 HERE

Powell and Pressburger would finally achieve their ambition of making a feature-length composed film with *Tales of Hoffmann*, their 1951 version of Jacques Offenbach's unfinished opera. Building on the Wagnerian vision of cinema suggested by *The Red Shoes*, *Tales of Hoffmann* presented a heady fusion of opera (an English-language version, conducted by Sir Thomas Beecham, was commissioned for the film); ballet (many of the principal roles where played by dancers, several of whom had appeared in *The Red Shoes*); literature (Hoffmann's short stories); and theatre (the entire film was shot on a sound stage, with highly artificial backdrops courtesy of designer, Hein Heckroth). It was also, however, wholly cinematic, with Powell using an impressive range of techniques, including stop-motion, jump cuts, superimpositions, bold lighting effects and the liberal movement of an unblimped three-strip Technicolor camera. Indeed, a short note at the start of the unpublished screenplay clearly demonstrates the film's remarkable fusion of the arts. It explains that:

> Since the action of the film is pre-determined by the music, the reader of this screenplay will find, accompanying the description of the action, the corresponding page number in the Score, also the same divisions (e.g. Scena; Trio; Song, etc)
>
> The screenplay should be read in conjunction with the Published Score and with the new libretto.
>
> In order to get a complete picture of the Production it is necessary to hear the new recording by Sir Thomas, to consult Hein's designs, and to see Ashton's choreography.

Thought by some to be 'the wildest Expressionist film ever made in Britain,'[xvii] *Tales of Hoffmann* runs counter to the realist tradition at every turn. One might expect a film such as this to be one of those eccentric one-offs that British cinema excels at producing, but it is far from it.

When it comes to art cinema's cross-over with opera and serious music, one might be forgiven for recalling Continental titles such as Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's *Chronical of Anna Magdalena Bach* (1968) or *Moses und Aron* (1973), Ingmar Bergman's *The Magic Flute* (1975), Hans Jurgen Syberberg's *Parsifal* (1982), Federico Fellini's *And the Ship Sailed* On (1983), Francesco Rosi's *Carmen* (1984), and various works by Franco Zeffirelli and Werner Shroeter, before any British examples. Nevertheless, despite the general suspicion towards art and experimentation in British film culture, one could argue that British cinema has in fact fostered an incredibly strong tradition of such films, the origins of which can be found in *The Red Shoes* and *Tales of Hoffmann*. This tradition includes opera adaptations like Joseph Losey's *Don Giovanni* (1979), Tony Palmer's *Death in Venice* (1981), and Don Boyd's *Lucia* (1998); Boyd's multi-director portmanteau production, *Aria* (1987), which featured contributions from Ken Russell, Nicolas Roeg, Derek Jarman and Julian Temple; Russell's film of The Who's "rock opera", *Tommy* (1975); as well as Jarman's feature-length film of Benjamin Britten's oratorio, *War Requiem* (1988). To this list one could also add Sally Potter's *Thriller* (1980), an experimental feminist deconstruction of Puccini's *La Boheme*, and, as this chapter will show, various works by Peter Greenaway. Finally, there are also the numerous composer biopics of Russell, and subsequent examples by the likes of Palmer and Bernard Rose.

Like Powell and Pressburger's ballet films, the British works listed above are art films due to their ties with high culture. More than this, however, these films also often contain self-reflexive elements, a key trait of modernist art cinema, not least in their use of virtuosic techniques 'that constantly amaze and dazzle the audience into an awareness that it is watching a film.'[xviii] They are also clearly *auteurist* works, which foreground their makers' concerns and personality. For instance, Losey's Marxism and the influence of Brecht are easily detected in *Don Giovanni*, just

as Jarman's voice is clearly heard alongside those of Britten and Wilfred Owen in *War Requiem*. Finally, like Powell's work, these films are also linked by a desire to experiment with the vocabulary and techniques of the cinema and to raise it to the level of the Wagnerian *gesamtkunstwerk*. Indeed, viewed collectively, the cannon of British composed films bears out the assertion of the composer, Ralph Vaughan Williams, who argued that 'the cinema contains potentialities for the combination of the arts such as Wagner never dreamt of.'[xix]

Ken Russell: Fusing the biopic and the composed film

If Powell and Pressburger were the fathers of this fascinating sub-genre of musically-orientated British art films, Ken Russell would go on to become its most prolific and visible exponent. As Gomez notes, Russell directly 'followed in Michael Powell's footsteps by attempting to employ cinema as a means of bringing together multiple art forms.'[xx] It is worth noting, however, that with the arguable exception of *Tommy*, Russell never fulfilled his ambition of making a full-length opera film like *Tales of Hoffmann* (in the late 1980s, in the wake of *Aria*, he and Don Boyd had tried to secure funding for an adaptation of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* - a tantalising prospect, which was sadly never to be). Rather, in a manner closer to *The Red Shoes*, Russell made films in which relatively conventional dialogue scenes would alternate with (often extended) passages in which dialogue was eschewed in favour of music, images and dance. Although they are not exclusively limited to those films, most of what I will call Russell's 'composed sequences' appeared in his biopics of famous composers. Like the ballet sequence in Powell and Pressburger's *The Red Shoes*, composed sequences where designed to comment on the psychological state of the characters as well as the emotional and, at times, programmatic elements of the music. Therefore,

in these segments, the aesthetics of the composed film and the complex concerns of Russell's unique brand of biopic are fused.

There are countless examples of such scenes in Russell's *oeuvre*, and they are often difficult to critically unpack, so a single example must suffice. Take, for instance, the often-derided '1812 Overture' sequence in Russell's Tchaikovsky biopic, *The Music Lovers* (1970). Dismissed by critics such as *Time Out*'s Paul Taylor as 'pure Monty Python,'[xxi] it is, in fact, one of the key scenes in the film, and a prime example of the complexity of Russell's work. Indeed, as Jack Fisher rightly asserts, Russell's detractors rarely give his films the full consideration they require; but for 'anyone who has been paying attention to the sexual and visual structure of [*The Music Lovers*] the fantasy is a logical development of the abnormal.'[xxii] As always, the subjective fantasy sequence is carefully integrated into the fabric of the film. Therefore, the '1812 Overture' is introduced in the preceding scene when Tchaikovsky (Richard Chamberlain) is reeling after being cut off by his former patron and platonic *par amour*, Madame Nadezhda von Meck. His brother, Modest (Kenneth Colley), tries to convince the rather introverted composer to take up conducting, stressing both the personal and financial benefits of doing so. 'If it's love you want', he argues, 'an audience will give you that.' As he continues, Russell axial cuts from a long shot to a medium two-shot of the brothers in their carriage. At the same time, Modest says, 'if only you'd conduct, you'd make a fortune' and Russell quietly places the 'La Marseilles' theme of the overture, played on the horns, under the dialogue. The music begins to build as Modest continues to try to cajole his brother, with the strings playing ostinatos beneath the horns. 'You could be famous, Peter', he argues. 'It's like a bonfire. It's all laid, it's set. It just needs the final touch and… wooosh.' As Modest says these words, the careful viewer/listener will become aware of the way in which Russell is coordinating the dialogue, editing and music. Those familiar with the overture will

recognise that the score has entered its final third and is inexorably building to the first wave of canon blasts; and as Modest onomatopoeically signals the lighting of the bonfire, Russell cuts to an image which brilliantly exploits the film's 'Scope ratio. On the left of the screen is a close shot of Tchaikovsky's spurned wife, Nina (Glenda Jackson), next to her on the right is the muzzle of the canon, which is pointed directly at the camera and the audience. It fires. With this startling, violent image, Russell makes the leap from reality (Modest and Peter talking in their carriage), to a subjective, fantastical space.

We then see Tchaikovsky running through a barren field dodging an artillery barrage fired at him by the assembled 'music lovers', including Nina, Madame von Meck, the composer's sister, his pupils and his former homosexual lover. With the logic of a dream Russell then match cuts to Tchaikovsky running through the streets of Moscow being pursued by his hangers on in carriages, on horseback, and on foot. Again, the images and the cutting clearly take their cue from the score. In the lead-up to the Overture's climatic victory bells, Tchaikovsky has the strings play an extended descending scale, lasting around forty seconds, which also gradually decreases in tempo. Russell responds to this change in speed firstly by extending the length of his shots, and finally, by over-cranking the camera. This culminates in two intercut tracking shots, both filmed in slow motion, which show Tchaikovsky running the gauntlet past a row of open windows as all those who have competed for the composer's love and attention reach out like ghouls and try to grab him. The combined effect of the music and the image slowing down in tandem is extraordinary and it perfectly demonstrates the combining of the arts that Russell, like Powell, strove for. Indeed, the music and image are so closely entwined here, that one gets the impression that the decreasing tempo of the former was caused by a slowing of the film apparatus, the camera and the projector, rather than careful scoring, conducting and playing from the orchestra.

As the overture moves into its climatic section, in which the bells ring out in celebration of Russian victory over the French, Russell once again demonstrates his skill at timing and cutting to a pre-existing musical source. Having temporarily escaped the 'music lovers', Tchaikovsky is spotted by his brother, Modest, who directs a throng of adoring fans towards him. The crowd carry the composer off to a parade where he is feted with flowers and brightly-coloured streamers. The victory bells lend an appropriate level of grandeur and pomp to Russell's depiction of this parade. Modest hands his brother a baton and motions to him to start conducting the crowd. The composer complies, at first reluctantly, and then with great enthusiasm. Before long, he is conducting from the roof of an Orthodox church as Modest, separate from the adoring crowd, collects and counts piles of banknotes. As the bells reach a crescendo, the music changes tempo and tone one final time, and suddenly segues into an exaggeratedly up-tempo reprise of the composer's theme, which had previous evoked the advancing French army, but which now depicts their hasty retreat. Russell matches this with an equally abrupt cut to a close shot of Modest, grinning with a cigar between his teeth, surrounded by the kicking legs, frilly skirts and suspenders of a bevy of Can-Can dancers, whom his brother is conducting with an equally big grin. It is mostly this moment, and what follows, that critics have taken objection to in this sequence.

The intent of this part of the fantasy sequence can, however, be summed up in another superb widescreen composition which shows Modest and the dancers, who take up the full width of the screen, performing on a stage in front of an enormous picture of the composer's face, framed by a laurel wreath. In the foreground of the shot, Tchaikovsky can be seen conducting. He then turns to face the audience and looks directly at the camera, grinning from ear-to-ear as he beats out the simple time signature of his most populist work. It is a highly amusing image, but Russell's lampooning always disguised a more serious purpose, and it shows the audience how Tchaikovsky

prostituted his talent for fame. Can-Can dancers may offer up a parodic and clichéd view of French culture. But so too, Russell is saying, does Tchaikovsky's overture, with its numerous quotations from 'La Marseilles' (a tune which Napoleon had essentially outlawed in 1805, so would not have been popular when France invaded Russia). Moreover, the Can-Can is above all associated with the work of Jacques Offenbach, a master of operetta and light music who wrote little of weight aside from *Tales of Hoffmann*. Tchaikovsky, however, was a serious Romantic composer, who in Russell's mind produced some of the most sublime music ever written, not least the final three symphonies, *Manfred*, *Swan Lake, Eugene Onegin* and the Piano Concerto in B-flat minor, which the film-maker credited with igniting his passion for classical music. To Russell then, a work like the '1812 Overture' represents a travesty and an unforgivable squandering of Tchaikovsky's immense talent. At the same time, this sequence serves as a reminder to the audience that it is usually the frivolous and the simplistic that sell, and it was off the back of works like the '1812 Overture' and the 'Serenade for String Orchestra', and his 1888-1889 conducting tour of Europe that the composer first became a household name.

The most controversial moment in the sequence is not the Can-Can dancers, however, but the visualisation of the final ten canon blasts in the score which come immediately after. Here, Russell depicts Modest gleefully firing a large canon in increasingly comical ways. This includes his riding it like an over-sized phallus and setting it off while pedalling an antique tricycle. His targets, however, are the 'music lovers' who have now gathered together in a box in the concert hall where Tchaikovsky is conducting. With each blast, Russell cuts to one of these characters and they are bloodily decapitated. On a superficial level, the meaning is obvious. The composer's newfound financial success and public adulation has allowed him to symbolically destroy the 'music lovers' and their hold over him. On closer inspection, however, things are not so simple.

Firstly, it is not Tchaikovsky but rather Modest who is firing the canon and, in effect, destroying his rivals. Throughout the film Modest is depicted as a jealous, possessive and manipulative figure (and there is plenty of biographical evidence to support such a characterisation), and here Russell is telling us that he has won and can now exploit his brother's talents without interference. Secondly, although the other 'music lovers' are destroyed by Modest's canon fire, Nina is not. On the contrary, rather than show her decapitated after she has been fired at, Russell instead cuts to a tighter close-up of her smiling. The implication is unsettling. With nobody else to distract him, Tchaikovsky is left free to fully contemplate his betrayal of the woman he married knowing full-well he could never love her, and it is this guilt, according to the film, that finally pushes the composer to suicide. Russell's segue from the colourful, boisterous '1812 Overture' fantasy to the grim final reel is masterful. As the bells chime, signalling the end of the score, Russell depicts Tchaikovsky being carried to and placed on a plinth in the town square, where he conducts the last bars of the overture draped in colourful paper streamers. As the final notes fade away Russell films the composer, his baton and arms stretched towards the sky, from a low angle. There is then a match cut and the man has become a statue. To some degree it is an image of triumph. Tchaikovsky has won the acceptance and fame he so desperately craved. At the same time, however, it has a very bleak undercurrent. The colour streamers have gone, and the palette is now decidedly muted, taking its cue from the cold, grey stone of the statue. Moreover, it is winter time, and the camera tracks back to reveal an empty square where the adoring public had once cheered. Attempting to summarise both this last shot and the sequence as a whole, Fisher argues that 'within a few minutes we are shown what it is like to be swept up by fame, and then in the dissolve the frenzy dies down and becomes stale. All of this is clear and precise in painter's terms, and all done without a single world.'[xxiii]

While Fisher is right to stress the clarity and boldness of Russell's visual storytelling, there are also ambiguities here. Most obviously, one cannot be certain whose vision one has just seen. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that it is Tchaikovsky's dream of success, but it might also be that of Modest. At the same time, the vision is also clearly Russell's own, in which he sets out both his admiration for, and problems with Tchaikovsky as an artist. It is this tension, and the ability to simultaneously present multiple viewpoints about a subject that make Russell's biopics so complex and ground breaking. Gomez has identified a 'tripartite perspective' in each film which 'incorporates the protagonist's own romantic self-image, a more objective view revealed by the perspective of time, and finally Russell's personal vision of his subject.'[xxiv] This is a far cry from the form of the traditional biopic. According to Dennis Bingham, the biopic has always been a 'respectable genre of low repute'.[xxv] A popular, and often prestigious form during the heyday of the Hollywood Studio system, biopics normally veered towards hagiography and offered a celebratory and sanitised view of their subjects. For Bingham it was also a 'producer's genre,'[xxvi] and any 'survey of studio biopics soon makes clear that the films were almost never made by the directors from the era who were later singled out as auteurs.'[xxvii] Much the same can be said for the rather staid British biopics made around the same time such as Norman Walker's *The Great Mister Handle* (1942), Sidney Gilliat's *The Story of Gilbert and Sullivan* (1953) or Ken Hughes's *The Trial of Oscar Wilde* (1960).

It is therefore not an exaggeration to say that Russell more than other figure in British, and perhaps even world cinema, 'revolutionised the nature of the bio-pic.'[xxviii] Moreover, one could argue that he did this by bringing this popular, conservative genre into contact with art cinema. Indeed, Russell dragged the biopic away from hagiography towards a more ambiguous and complex 'warts and all' depiction of the life in focus. If his most popular biographical film, *Elgar*

(1962), is atypically uncritical of its subject, his subjects from *The Debussy Film* (1963) onward, to borrow a phrase from Bordwell, 'act for inconsistent reasons […] or may question themselves about their goals.'[xxix] This is certainly true of Russell's depiction of Tchaikovsky, but also of Dante Gabriel Rossetti in *Dante's Inferno* (1967), or the eponymous protagonist in *Mahler* (1974), to name but two more. Russell is also not afraid to analyse his characters and lay their psyches bare on film, as he does throughout *The Music Lovers*. In this respect, his films are also, to again quote from Bordwell, 'one of psychological effects in search of their causes.'[xxx] At the same time, Russell also practically invented the notion of the auteur biopic in which the authorial expressivity of the film's director is as important as the personality and biography of its subject. Lastly, Russell's biopics, with their visualised dreams, their composed sequences that eschew dialogue, and their elliptical, episodic and unconventional structures (*Mahler*, for instance, takes on the shape of a musical *rondo*), unquestionably 'define themselves directly against the classical narrative mode.'[xxxi]

The films that Bingham sites as his examples of American 'auteur biopics', such as Martin Scorsese's *Raging Bull* (1980), Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* (1992) and Gus Van Sant's *Milk* (2008), and other notable American art-cinema inflected biopics such as Bob Fosse's *Lenny* (1974), Paul Schrader's *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters* (1985), all unquestionably owe a debt to Russell in terms of their structure and approach to the genre. In Britain too, there is a small but significant tradition of art cinema biopics which betrays Russell's influence. This includes Peter Watkin's *Edvard Munch* (1974); Ken McMullen's *Zina* (1985, about Trotsky's daughter, Zinaida Volkova); Derek Jarman's *Caravaggio* (1986) and *Wittgenstein* (1992); Alex Cox's *Sid and Nancy* (1986); John Maybury's *Love is the Devil: Study for a Portrait of Francis Bacon* (1998). Additionally, there is a further sub-classification of films which have merged the biopic with the composed film,

such as Tony Palmer's *Wagner* (1981) and *Testimony* (1988, about Dimitri Shostakovich) and Bernard Rose's *Immortal Beloved* (1994, about Ludwig van Beethoven) and *The Devil's Violinist* (2013, about Niccolò Paganini), and have built on Russell's work both in terms of form and visual style. Indeed, Rose went as far as to dedicate *The Devil's Violinist* to the late director, who died in 2011. Ironically, however, the film-maker who has assumed Russell's mantle as British cinema's doyen of both the composed film and the artist's biopic is one who never confessed to feeling a great affinity with either Russell's work or British cinema in general: Peter Greenaway.

Peter Greenaway: New innovations in the composed film and the biopic

The names of Derek Jarman and Peter Greenaway are often linked in studies of British art cinema. On one level, this is entirely understandable, as the two men defined (and some would go as far as to say 'introduced') the concept of British art cinema in the 1980s. At the same time, however, there are significant differences between the two film-makers that are not always fully accounted for. The two, for instance, diverged greatly in their opinion of British national cinema and their place in it. While Jarman had little time for what he called the 'spurious social realism of the sixties'[xxxii] and heritage costume drama, he clearly saw himself working within a British art cinema tradition, albeit a marginalised one. He saw himself struggling alongside fellow film-makers such as Peter Watkins, Bill Douglas, Terence Davies, Sally Potter and Ron Peck. He also spoke highly of the early films of Nicolas Roeg, John Boorman and Neil Jordan.[xxxiii] His favourites remained Ken Russell, of whom he wrote that 'there was no better director to learn from',[xxxiv] and, above all, Michael Powell, whose work he thought to be 'unequalled'.[xxxv] Their influence can also be clearly felt in Jarman's work. *Caravaggio*, for example, is an iconoclastic artist's biopic very much

in the Russell tradition, while *War Requiem* is a composed film in the mode of Powell and Pressburger. Greenaway, as noted above, has often tried to distance himself from British cinema and has prefers to align his work with continental film-makers such as Fellini, Jean-Luc Godard and Alain Resnais. He has, for instance, said that 'apart from *Peeping Tom*, I am not a great fan' of Powell and Pressburger.[xxxvi] As for Russell, he admits to having 'always enjoyed *The Devils*', but at the same time, he was somewhat baffled when a critic called him 'the intellectual Ken Russell'.[xxxvii] Nevertheless, Greenaway's work still bears close affinities with theirs, not least in his use of music, and, more recently, his interest in the biopic.

Greenaway's preference for Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960) is particularly telling. It is Powell's most overtly meta-cinematic work, which, according to Roy Armes, incorporates 'elements of film-within-a-film with a complexity worthy of Alain Resnais' *Night and Fog.*'[xxxviii] Like many other art cinema *auteurs*, including Godard, Fellini and Pier Paolo Pasolini, Greenaway both makes and favours films which are self-reflexive and call attention to their artifice. One of the primary ways in which he does this is through his use of music. As Alan Woods notes, 'artifice requires that we constantly be aware of music as an element in [a Greenaway] film.'[xxxix] For example, his collaboration with the composer, Michal Nyman, which lasted from his early experimental shorts of the late 1970s until *Prospero's Books* (1991), reversed the traditional method of composing film scores. Usually, a composer is given a rough cut of the finished film and a cue sheet detailing the sections in the film where the director wants musical accompaniment. Nyman, however, would compose the music first, having seen no more than the screenplay. Greenaway was therefore able to shoot and edit the film to the score. At other times, Greenaway would use music that Nyman had written for other occasions. For example, in *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife & Her Lover* (1989), Greenaway took Nyman's funereal march 'Memorial', which was

originally written in 1985 to commemorate the Heysel Stadium disaster, and shot large sections of the film to playback of this piece. This is evident in the long lateral tracking shots in the film that move through the kitchen into the dining room of the *La Hollandaise* restaurant. The pacing of these shots, and the actors walking in them, is clearly dictated by the steady 8:8 time of the march. This gives the film a deliberate, choreographed quality which is unashamedly artificial and stylized. Another example is the opening title sequence of *Prospero's Books.* Here, Greenaway takes Nyman's piece, 'Prospero's Magic', which was written in 4:4 time, and intercuts the action with staccato shots of a flame every four beats. His decision to cut on the downbeat is what Bobbie O'Steen describes as a "hard cut", which 'is emphatic and calls attention to itself'.[xl] This runs counter to convention, which dictates that editing should be an 'invisible' art, as O'Steen notes when he writes 'an editor should not, as a rule, cut his images exactly to the beat of the music, because it will seem as if the music is pulling the visuals along.'[xli] For Greenaway, however, this is not an undesirable outcome. On the contrary, it adds another layer of self-reflexivity to the film by laying bare its devices. As the director himself states, 'I want people to hear the music in my films independent of what's going on in the film. That sense of artificiality is part of the vocabulary I have developed over the years to point out that you are only watching a film.'[xlii]

While comparisons could be drawn between the collaboration of Greenaway and Nyman and, that of say, Sergei Eisenstein and Sergei Prokofiev, or Federico Fellini and Nino Rota, where the music was similarly written before the film was completed, it is also comparable to the way that Powell and Pressburger worked with Brian Easdale. Indeed, while Greenaway has never made a feature-length composed film, he has collaborated with the Dutch composer, Louis Andriessen, on a short film, *M is for Man, Music and Mozart* (1993), which is entirely set to music. Moreover, his feature films contain extended and obvious composed sequences, like those mentioned above

or the wedding masque sequence in *Prospero's Books*, which is almost a self-contained mini-opera, akin to the ballet scene in *The Red Shoes*. At the same time, Greenaway's use of music also bears comparison with that of Russell, despite the latter's protests. Russell, who equally cannot be counted as an admirer of Greenaway's, has written that Nyman told him that 'he usually supplies the director with reams of music, not necessarily composed for any particular scene, which Greenaway cuts into arbitrary chunks according to his needs.'[xliii] Russell clearly sees this as a slight to the composer. But he too has never been averse to cutting and rearranging a composer's music. Indeed, in the train carriage sequence in *The Music Lovers*, in which a naked Nina drunkenly tries to seduce her visibly disgusted husband, Russell took the most dramatic passages of Tchaikovsky's *Manfred* and *Pathetique* symphonies and edited them together in a manner which matched the intensity of the scene. Similarly, in *Mahler*, Russell is constantly patching together fragments of the composer's symphonies based on themes, such as nature or death.

While their approach to music is in many ways similar, Greenaway perhaps comes closest to Russell in their shared affinity for the biopic. While Russell is synonymous with the genre, Greenaway has come to it relatively late. Although he had engaged with the work of Jan Vermeer directly in both *A Zed and Two Noughts* (1985) and in *Writing to Vermeer* (1998), an epistolary opera he wrote with Andriessen, he did not make a proper film biopic until *Nightwatching*, his 2007 film about Rembrandt van Rijn. He did, however, begin the twenty-first century by making *The Tulse Luper Suitcases*, a mammoth multi-media project comprising three features, a 16-part television series and several books, exhibitions, interactive CD-ROMs and an on-line game. Those who are familiar with Greenaway's early experimental films of the late 1970s and early 1980s will know that Tulse Luper was the fictional ornithologist and cartographer featured in *A Walk Through H* (1978), and the structural film-maker in *Vertical Features Remake* (1978), as well as a recurring

presence in Greenaway's epic avant-garde film, *The Falls* (1980). *The Tulse Luper Suitcases*, then, was an enormously ambitious biopic of a fictional character, which follows Luper from his birth in South Wales in 1911 to his disappearance at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Throughout the feature films an "expert" on Luper's life and work, and several of his acquaintances, are called upon to give testimony (usually in a direct to camera address shown in a small frame within the main image of the film). In this way, Greenaway gives his fictional story an air of veracity and documentary truth. The final scene of the film, however, returns to Luper's childhood in Wales and reveals that he, in fact, died aged ten when a wall collapsed on him (an event the audience had previously seen him survive). The "expert" then tells the audience that Luper's 'life, in all its complexity, was a construction, created by his best friend, Martino Knockavelli.' This ending is typical of Greenaway, who revels in revealing artifice, but it also says a good deal about his attitude towards biographical filmmaking. Despite the presence of so-called experts and the pretences it makes toward telling established, historical facts, *The Tulse Luper Suitcases* is an elaborate fiction. For Greenaway, however, it is no more of a fiction than a biopic of Rembrandt or Vermeer would be. All biopics, he tells us, and all documentaries for that matter, are artificial, fictional constructions, which tell a story and offer a subjective viewpoint.

The three theatrically released *Tulse Luper* films were as formally radical as anything Greenaway had ever produced. Building on the experiments he had begun in *A TV Dante* (1989), *Prospero's Books* (1991) and *The Pillow Book* (1995), the *Tulse Luper* Trilogy is full of multi-layered, digitally manipulated images which combine text and image, and frequently shift aspect ratios. Despite this formal innovation, the films also form a classic *bildungsroman* which tells Luper's life story from his childhood to his death. It is therefore, ignoring the revelation that Luper died as a child, a conventionally structured, if unusually long a detailed biopic. His next forays in

the genre would, however, play more with its conventions. *Nightwatching*, for example, was stylistically, the director's most accessible work since *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife & Her Lover*. The film features no superimposed text, split screen, or multi-layered images, and the digital post-production does not visibly extend beyond a few discreet ratio changes and exacting colour grading which helps the film recapture the subtle quality of Rembrandt's *chiaroscuro* lighting. It is not, however, a standard biopic. Rather, Greenaway offers a subtle subversion of the genre, in a manner that appropriately parallels Rembrandt's subversion of the conventions of the militia group portraits that were so popular during the Golden Age of Dutch painting.

Firstly, the film is not a *bildungsroman*. It instead focuses on a relatively short period, the two years between 1640 and 1642 during which Rembrandt painted *The Nightwatch*, and his wife, Saskia, died. Intercut with this main narrative are short scenes which depict Rembrandt's early married life in the mid-1630s and his old age in the 1660s. Typically, one would expect the actors in these flash-forwards and flash-backs to be visibly aged, through a combination of make-up and their performances. This is not the case in *Nightwatching*, however. For instance, Martin Freeman, who plays Rembrandt, was thirty-six at the time of filming (roughly the same age the painter was when he finished *The Nightwatch*), and he looks this age throughout the film, whether he is playing the painter aged twenty-eight or sixty. This is not the most extreme example. Emily Holmes, who was thirty, plays Rembrandt's servant and later lover, Hendrickje Stoffels, from her teens to her forties, without any visible physical change, whereas Nathalie Press, who was twenty-seven, plays a (fictitious) ten-year-old victim of child abuse, who Rembrandt incorporates into his canvas. On the one hand, this is clearly a device in the tradition of Bertolt Brecht's *verfremdungseffekt*, which seeks to remind the audience that they are watching actors perform. It also, however, disrupts any obvious sense of chronology and the audience must work hard to determine where some scenes

would take place on a linear timeline of events. Such ambiguity would be unthinkable in a more conventional biopic. Regardless of whether its plot is linear, to explain its subject, the classical biopic relies heavily on cause-effect narrative logic and a clear chronology which often leads to a watershed moment. As Ellen Cheshire notes, many biopics begin 'at an incredibly high or low point in that life and then flash back to the start to see how that success or failure was reached.'[xliv] *Nightwatching* greatly subverts this model and is, in fact, as much a biopic of a single work of art, *The Nightwatch*, as it is of the man who painted it.

Despite taking several years to find cinematic distribution in Britain, *Nightwatching* marked a relative return to prominence for Greenaway, and it earned him some of the best notices of his career. He followed it up with *Goltzius and the Pelican Company* (2012), another highly unconventional biopic about the Dutch printmaker, Hendrik Goltzius and his attempt to find a patron to support his plans to print an editing of the Bible complete with erotic illustrations. Since then he announced that he will be making a film about Hieronymus Bosch that will form the final chapter in this 'Dutch Masters' trilogy. Running concurrently with this is another proposed biopic trilogy, in this case about a single artist, the Soviet film-maker, Sergei Eisenstein. The first part of this trilogy, *Eisenstein in Guanajuato* (2015), again eschewed a tradition *bildungsroman* structure in favour of something more concentrated. In this case, the film takes place over a mere ten days, and offers a semi-fictionalised account of the director's first homosexual encounter during the filming of *Que Viva Mexico!* Despite this narrow time frame, however, the film offers the audience what Brian Hoyle has called 'an excess of information about its subject'.[xlv] Throughout the film Greenaway's uses digital editing techniques, including split screens in which the actors are shown side-by-side with photos and footage of their real-life counterparts and composed sequences set to the music of Eisenstein's key collaborator, Sergei Prokofiev. Moreover, the densely layered script

includes several monologues about Eisenstein's theories and travels that cannot be fully absorbed on one viewing. These are clearly intended to encourage the 'audience to stop being viewers, with all the passivity that the word suggestions, and instead to become (inter)active researchers.'[xlvi] If, as Hoyle suggests, a work like *Eisenstein in Guanajuato* 'perhaps offers a useful model for the art cinema of the future,'[xlvii] one which embraces new technology and interactivity, he is also keen to stress Greenaway's position as a traditionalist as well as a radical.

For example, by making both *Nightwatching* and *Eisenstein in Guanajuato* the opening instalments in trilogies, Greenaway is engaging with a well-established art cinema tradition. Indeed, as critics like Erik Hedling have stressed, the idea of the thematically-linked trilogy is a privileged one in the *auteurist* world of art cinema,[xlviii] where, as Bordwell puts it, each film 'offers itself as a chapter in an *oeuvre*'.[xlix] By making biopics about painters such as Rembrandt and film-makers such as Eisenstein, Greenaway is also self-consciously drawing parallels between their work and his own status as a visually-orientated experimental film-maker who has sought, by his own admission, to bring 'the aesthetics of painting to the cinema'.[l] It is perhaps ironic, however, that Greenaway's identification with artists he perceives as being somewhat marginalised or misunderstood in fact brings him closer to the centre of British art cinema. Just as Greenaway's preference for using music to stress the artifice of his films aligns him with a tradition in British cinema that begins with Powell and Pressburger, his identification with certain artistic forebears is a trait he shares with Russell, who clearly felt a kinship with many of his subjects, perhaps most notably Henri Rousseau and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, whom he made *Always on Sunday* (1965) and *Savage Messiah* (1972) about respectively. Whether he likes it or not, Greenaway can therefore be seen to be working in two richly overlapping traditions of British art cinema, that of the

composed film and the artist's biopic. Moreover, his work clearly demonstrates that this tradition is alive and well, while also hinting at what it might look like in the future.

Notes

[i] Ken Russell, *Fire Over England: British Cinema Comes Under Friendly Fire* (London: Hutchinson, 1993), p. 86.

[ii] Wendy Everett, *Terence Davies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 89.

[iii] Pamela Church Gibson, 'Ken Russell', *Screenonline: The Definitive Guide to Britain's Film and TV History*, available at: http://www.screenonline.org.uk/people/id/467596/index.html [accessed 17 January 2018].

[iv] Sarah Street, *British National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 149.

[v] Peter Wollen, 'The Last New Wave: Modernism in British Cinema of the Thatcher Era' in Lester Friedman (ed.), *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism, Second Edition* (London: Wallflower Press, 2006), pp. 30-44.

[vi] Julian Petley, 'The Lost Continent', in Charles Barr (ed.), *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1986), pp. 98-119.

[vii] Nanette Aldred, 'Hein Heckroth and The Archers,' in Ian Christie and Andew Moor (eds), *The Cinema of Michael Powell: International Perspectives on an English Filmmaker* (London: British Film Institute, 2005), pp. 186-206; p. 192.

[viii] Michael Powell, *A Life in the Movies* (London: Faber, 2000), p. 581.

[ix] Powell, *A Life in the Movies*, p. 583.

[x] Powell, *A Life in the Movies*, p. 583.

[xi] Powell, *A Life in the Movies*, p. 583.

[xii] Russell, *Fire over England*, p. 34.

[xiii] Joseph A. Gomez, 'The Process of Jarman's *War Requiem*: Personal Vision and the Tradition of Fusion of the Arts', in Chris Lippard (ed.), *By Angels Driven: The Films of Derek Jarman* (Westport: Praeger, 1996), pp. 84-102; p. 89.

[xiv] Aldred, 'Hein Heckroth and The Archers', p. 192.

[xv] Steve Neale, 'The Art Cinema as Institution', *Screen*, 22: 1 (1981), pp. 11-40; p. 13.

[xvi] Aldred, 'Hein Heckroth and The Archers', p. 192.

[xvii] Gomez, 'The Process of Jarman's *War Requiem*', p. 89.

[xviii] Gomez, 'The Process of Jarman's *War Requiem*', p. 89.

[xix] Arthur Jacobs, 'Some Recent Trends in Opera', in Rollo H. Meyers (ed.), *Twentieth Century Music* (London: John Calder, 1960), pp. 74-86; p. 75.

[xx] Gomez, 'The Process of Jarman's *War Requiem*', p. 89.

[xxi] Paul Taylor, 'The Music Lovers', in John Pym (ed.), *Time Out Film Guide* (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 786.

[xxii] Jack Fisher, 'Three Masterpieces of Sexuality: Women in Love, The Music Lovers and The Devils', in Thomas R. Atkins (ed.), *Ken Russell* (New York, NY: Monarch Press, 1976), pp. 39-67; p. 54.

[xxiii] Fisher, 'Three Masterpieces of Sexuality', p. 55.

[xxiv] Joseph Gomez, *Ken Russell: The Adaptor as Creator* (Fredrick Muller: London, 1976), p. 35.

[xxv] Dennis Bingham, *Whose Lives are they Anyway? The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), p. 3.

[xxvi] Bingham, *Whose Lives are they Anyway?*, p. 18.

[xxvii] Bingham, *Whose Lives are they Anyway?*, p. 20.

[xxviii] Gomez, *Ken Russell*, p. 89.

[xxix] David Bordwell, 'The Art Cinema as Mode of Film Practice', *Film Criticism*, 4: 1 (1979), pp. 56-64; p. 58.

[xxx] Bordwell, 'The Art Cinema as Mode of Film Practice', p. 58.

[xxxi] Bordwell, 'The Art Cinema as Mode of Film Practice', p. 57.

[xxxii] Jarman, *Dancing Ledge* (London: Quartet Books, 1984), p. 216.

[xxxiii] Jarman, *Dancing Ledge*, p. 234.

[xxxiv] Jarman, *Dancing Ledge*, p. 105.

[xxxv] Jarman, *Dancing Ledge*, p. 216.

[xxxvi] Alan Woods, *Being Naked, Playing Dead: The Art of Peter Greenaway* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 254.

[xxxvii] Woods, *Being Naked, Playing Dead*, p. 254.

[xxxviii] Roy Armes, *A Critical History of British Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 227.

[xxxix] Woods, *Being Naked, Playing Dead*, p. 203.

[xl] Bobbie O'Steen, *The Invisible Cut: How Editors Make Movie Magic* (Los Angeles, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 2009), p. 42.

[xli] O'Steen, *The Invisible Cut*, p. 42.

[xlii] Nicholas Renaud and Daniel Lynds, 'Cinema Speak: Peter Greenaway Conference Notes', *Off Screen*, available at: offscreen.com/view/peter_greenaway [accessed 17 January 2018].

[xliii] Russell, *Fire over England*, p. 168.

[xliv] Ellen Cheshire, *Bio-Pics: A Life in Pictures* (London: Wallflower, 2015), p. 12.

[xlv] Brian Hoyle, 'When Peter Met Sergei: Art Cinema Past, Present and Future in *Eisenstein in Guanajuato*', *The Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 13: 2 (April 2016), pp. 312-330; p. 317.

[xlvi] Hoyle, 'When Peter Met Sergei', p. 321.

[xlvii] Hoyle, 'When Peter Met Sergei', p. 327.

[xlviii] Erik Hedling, 'Lindsay Anderson and the Development of British Art Cinema', in Robert Murphy (ed.), *The British Cinema Book* (London: British Film Institute, 1997), pp. 178-86; pp. 178-9.

[xlix] Bordwell, 'The Art Cinema as Mode of Film Practice', p. 59.

[l] Veron Gras and Marguerite Gras, *Peter Greenaway: Interviews* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2000), p. vii.